

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

In the U.S., one in five college women experience sexual assault (Harris, 2019). Despite this widely publicized statistic, university leaders continue to respond retroactively to sexual violence on their campuses. Too often, these responses are improperly executed with disregard to trauma-informed practices and without accountability for both perpetrators and the institutions that fail to prevent their behaviors, leading to a feeling of betrayal from survivors and the community that stands with them. Harris (2019) applies organizational communication theory to higher education institutions, arguing that universities create and perpetuate a rape culture that blames individual perpetrators in order to deflect attention from the reality that the universities themselves are culpable. Bataille and Cordova (2014) offer university leaders advice for how to fix this problem by teaching best practices for crisis communication and providing case studies of crises, including the infamous Sandusky scandal at Penn State. Together, these two communication theory books evoke common themes that explain how sexual violence and crisis communication are intertwined: first, that quality communication from the college president is paramount during crises relating to sexual violence, and second, that the system of shared governance in campus leadership plays an important role in distributing responsibility for the presence of rape culture on college campuses. University leaders need to confront their institutions' participation in producing rape culture and educate themselves on how to perform effective crisis communication around sexual violence.

Summary

Beyond the Rapist. Harris's (2019) *Beyond the Rapist: Title IX and Sexual Violence on U.S. Campuses* examines how colleges and universities respond to sexual violence through the lens of organizational communication scholarship. Harris argues that it is necessary to look "beyond the rapist" to observe how "complex physical and symbolic components of violence are embedded in organizations" (Harris, 2019, p. 1). The topic of sexual violence on college campuses is quite salient, as higher education is currently under scrutiny for its handling of and communication about sexual misconduct. This is indicated by recent investigations of universities by the U.S. Department of Education for mishandling Title IX cases and the rise of student activists calling for reforms in Title IX policies and procedures.

However, these serious situations are often met with inappropriate responses. Harris (2019) argues that the problem of rape culture on college campuses is rooted in society's willingness to think that perpetrators of sexual violence act as individuals alone, thus distancing organizations from any responsibility in the toxic environment they create. As such, public officials openly object to the accuracy of prevalence research on sexual assault on college campuses because of the belief that rape can only be committed by individuals. However, these misguided ideas are problematic, as organizational communication scholarship shows that "Violence communicates not via representation, but through material-discursive processes" (Harris, 2019, p. 62). In other words, physical representations, such as statistics, do not actually reveal the processes of communication happening within an organization that actively shape a culture.

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These concepts come from a theory Harris (2019) offers called feminist new materialism, which is “a set of intellectual, political, and ethical assumptions [that] couple matter with meaning, the natural with the cultural, the physical with the symbolic” (p. 9). The material referenced in the term “refers variously to bodies, to objects, to texts, and even to discourse” through which organizations, such as universities, contribute to the formation of a rape culture. In summary, Harris’s organizational communication theory explains how higher education institutions are responsible for the continued existence of sexual violence on campus.

Managing the Unthinkable. Bataille and Cordova’s (2014) *Managing the Unthinkable: Crisis Preparation and Response for Campus Leaders* is a collection of short essays authored by university leaders and crisis management professionals detailing their experiences with crisis communication on college campuses. As a whole, the book describes the ways in which “Campus events require that presidential leadership is strong and unwavering in the best of times, but the qualities of leadership are tested during a crisis” (Bataille & Cordova, 2014, p. 1). The authors share advice based on their own experiences, addressing the reader directly as future and current university leaders.

While the book contains chapters about the many types of crises that institutional leaders encounter, this essay focuses on the sections that pertain to sexual violence and crisis communication. Primarily, the collection centers around how “Preparation and campus readiness are critical to responding effectively to a crisis” and how “building an effective team that responds appropriately and compassionately to the situation” is necessary for effective crisis communication and management (Bataille & Cordova, 2014, p. 147). Emphasis is placed on the crucial role that university leaders play in the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases.

The essays also express disheartenment at how many university leaders are unprepared and untrained to make appropriate responses when crises arise. Much of the book focuses on how when crises are managed and communicated poorly, the situation can not only damage the reputation of the institution, but leave the community feeling betrayed and unsafe. Ultimately, it is important for leaders at all levels of shared governance to proactively prepare for crises and appropriately respond to the community through effective crisis communication, especially during sexual violence scandals.

Analysis

The Role of Campus Leadership. Quality communication from campus leadership is essential, especially during a Title IX crisis. Organizations and sexual violence are directly related; therefore, university leaders must address this sensitive and complex problem with appropriate communication. Harris (2019) defines sexual violence as “ongoing sexism and racism that manifests not only during assault but also in organizational processes” such as institutional policies and procedures (p. 4). Unfortunately, an organization can perpetuate sexual violence by reinforcing rape culture within its practices. For instance, universities weaponize Title IX policies by blaming individual perpetrators of campus sexual misconduct. This in turn deflects attention and responsibility away from the organization, which enables a culture in which such crimes are permissible and normalized.

Scholarship suggests that organizations are not simply places in which violence occurs, but instead that violence is an integrated component of organizations. The mindset that “When

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an organization is the container for humans' violent acts, organizations cannot be agents of violence" is detrimental to the health of campus cultures (Harris, 2014, p. 44). Furthermore, Harris (2019) argues that people find it hard to believe that organizations can act when organizations do in fact have agency and can speak. When this false idea prevails, rape culture becomes deeply ingrained in the environment in which organization members are steeped, which explains why certain institutions—like higher education, the military, and the Roman Catholic Church—are known for high rates of sexual assault. Yet, organizations like these claim that the prevalence of sexual assault is due to the few corrupt individuals within the organization, not the organization itself. When society is ignorant to the role of organizations in creating cultures of sexual violence, the result is that there is no recognition of how they influence their members to initiate violence in the first place (Harris, 2019).

During times of crisis involving sexual misconduct, the community turns to campus leadership. The college president, as the spokesperson of the institution, is under pressure to make statements and take actions that support stakeholders. After all, "The campus is a microcosm of a small town—with faculty, staff, students, alumni, and the surrounding community all potentially affected by the actions—or inactions—of the campus leader" (Bataille & Cordova, 2014, p. 2). As such, "The president of an institution is responsible for setting the stage for a leadership response and ensuring communications flow to the audiences that want or need an update" (Bataille & Cordova, 2014, p. 172). It is up to the president to show leadership by managing all major communication around the crisis.

However, too often presidents perform poorly in the area of crisis communication. This can cause entirely new problems for the university that compound with the original crisis, because community members are left feeling alienated. It is important for university leaders to recognize that "There will always be another crisis. But there doesn't always have to be another scandal. How you handle them determines whether it becomes an isolated event or something larger that rocks your institutional foundation" (Bataille & Cordova, 2014, p. 8). To avoid making matters worse, it is recommended that university presidents use strategies such as portraying compassion, making themselves available for interviews, and proactively reaching out to the press before word spreads secondhand.

To prevent a mishandling of the crisis, the university president needs to take control. This begins with an understanding of how an institution's culture trickles down from the top of the organizational chart, beginning with upper-level leadership. Presidents need to recognize their important role in setting the tone for the organization and take part in "Creating an atmosphere of transparency, accountability, and ethical behavior ... [not just] when a scandal strikes to protect your reputation [but to] reinforce your good name every day" (Bataille & Cordova, 2014, p. 9). This practice of transparency and care is pertinent to the president's response to sexual violence, because all members of the organization need to live in an environment that educates about reporting and makes them feel unafraid to do so. University leaders can achieve this by thoughtfully crafting their communications with the community. It is recommended that presidents take certain action steps when addressing a crisis, which include: assuring stakeholders that they are addressing the situation, acknowledging and showing support for victims, and communicating in a transparent and accountable manner (Bataille & Cordova, 2014).

Responsibility of Shared Governance. When they communicate poorly, university leaders in the system of shared governance are responsible for the presence of rape culture on college campuses. During times of crisis, stakeholders look to campus leadership, and "How

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leaders respond in the first several hours and in the days that follow [the crisis] offers tremendous opportunity to bring a campus together or put the campus at risk” (Bataille & Cordova, 2014, p. 147). A poor response to the crisis can leave community members feeling either supported or betrayed. The community’s reaction to the institution’s choices is impactful and leaves a permanent impression of campus leaders, the institution, and its culture as a whole.

In order to generate an uplifting rather than retraumatizing message to survivors and their supporters, organization leaders must engage in transparent communication. Unfortunately, many campus leaders fear that transparent communication will be a liability to the institution; however, it is best practice to be open and honest so that the community feels that the situation is being addressed rather than covered up. While reactive communication from campus leaders to the community is important when a crisis arises, proactive internal communication within the leadership team is absolutely critical for setting an institutional culture that opposes sexual violence in the first place. Presidents and other campus leaders must acknowledge that “Ongoing and regular communication is key to effective response ... keep the communication flowing at all levels of the response team” (Bataille & Cordova, 2014, p. 150). When the board, president, and administrators of an institution do not maintain constant communication about both the university’s stance on issues like sexual violence and response to an ongoing Title IX crisis, these actions serve to create and perpetuate rape culture.

Too often this is the case, as exemplified in the Sandusky scandal at Penn State University. While this case made major headlines and continues to be known as one of the worst Title IX violations in the history of higher education, one thing that many do not know about this case is that the independent investigating firm involved found the Board of Trustees of the organization at fault (Bataille & Cordova, 2014). This situation exemplifies Harris’s (2019) primary argument that blame tends to be cast upon individuals rather than organizations for sexual violence. While many involved in the scandal were convicted of crimes, the report found that leadership failed in its obligation to address the criminal behavior. The report details the ways in which the Board of Trustees did not uphold its fiduciary duties, which include its failures to: oversee or inquire about the investigation when reports about Sandusky came in, establish regular reporting procedures or committee structures to ensure that major risks were disclosed to the board, and generally get involved until the investigation was released to the public. Here, it is clear that shared governance was executed poorly through improper communication among the board, president, and administration. As a result, Penn State’s Board of Trustees “failed to create an environment where officials would take necessary actions in response to the concerns about [Sandusky],” thus making the institution responsible for creating and perpetuating rape culture through their poor communication before, during, and after the crisis (Bataille & Cordova, 2014, p. 122). In the end, even though their inaction was not illegal, the Board of Trust as an internal organization within the greater institution failed the university (Bataille & Cordova, 2014).

Conclusion

University leaders must acknowledge the importance of leadership and shared governance in the creation of rape culture at their institutions and implement best practices for crisis communication for crises pertaining to sexual violence. Harris (2019) and Bataille and

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Cordova (2014) utilize two forms of communication theory—organizational communication theory and crisis communication theory—to explain the ways in which sexual violence and communication are directly related. Overall, the two books act in conversation with one another to call forth two common themes: first, that university presidents are pillars of the community and must communicate effectively during times of crisis, and second, that all constituents in shared governance must be held accountable for the ways in which their communication perpetuates rape culture. Until changes are made to the way institutions of higher education communicate, campuses cannot be physically and emotionally safe places for students to access their education.

References

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